

Vilsack, who I hope the Senate today will concur in his being passed through for being Secretary of Agriculture.

I have known Tom well since the 1980s. He was a lawyer in Mount Pleasant, IA, at that time. We had a terrible catastrophe in agriculture; farmers were going broke, a lot of suicides were being committed in my State and around rural America.

Tom Vilsack was a small-town lawyer. I did not know him from anybody. But he took upon himself the job of defending a lot of these small farmers, helping them to work through their problems, and getting them through these hard times.

That is the first time I ever came in contact with him. I thought he was one of those rare individuals who saw something that was wrong which needed to be done and he would involve himself in it. He did not make any money doing this. There was no money to be made. But he got involved in it, and I can tell you, he helped many small farmers hang onto their farms.

Well, later on, by then a tragedy happened in Mount Pleasant, IA. Tom Vilsack was then on the city council. There was a terrible tragedy in which the mayor had been murdered, and they asked Tom to take over as mayor—again, another catastrophe in that small community. So Tom Vilsack then took over as mayor of Mount Pleasant, pulled the city together, kept it going, and lifted it up.

Shortly after that then, he ran to be a State Senator and was elected as a State Senator. He served very admirably there. He then later ran to be Governor and served for two terms as the Governor of our State of Iowa. He had a great two terms—8 years, 4 years each—as our Governor. Again, he showed he could bring people together. That is why I think he is going to be good with our former colleague, now President Obama.

For the entire 8 years Tom Vilsack was Governor, he had a Republican legislature, but he worked with them. They worked together. We got some good things done in the State of Iowa, both with a Republican legislature and a Democratic Governor. I think that showed his method. That, plus what he had done earlier, I think showed the true mark of this individual.

So I could not have been happier when I found that President Obama had picked him to be Secretary of Agriculture. Tom Vilsack knows production agriculture. He knows what is happening out on the farms. He also is one of the strongest proponents of the conservation of natural resources and clean water and clean air. Suffice to say, I think all my friends at Pheasants Forever and Ducks Unlimited and all the people I go hunting with every year love Tom Vilsack because of all he has done to encourage wildlife habitats and the conservation of our natural resources—something, again, I feel very strongly about.

Then, again, in his hearing before our Agriculture Committee, he talked

about nutrition and the role nutrition plays in health care reform and how we have to think about prevention and wellness. That starts with our kids. And what starts with our kids? School lunches and school breakfasts and the foods they eat in school, the women, infants, and children's supplemental feeding program, what kind of food are they getting?

Now, before the Agriculture Committee this year, Senator CHAMBLISS and I will be working together on our committee to reauthorize the Child Nutrition Act. That is the school lunch, school breakfast, and the WIC program, the women, infants, and children's supplemental feeding program. We have to do better for our kids. We have to get better food, locally grown foods, healthier foods, fruits and vegetables, and things such as that for our kids to eat. He talked about this in his hearing before our committee.

So I do not wish to take any more time of the Senate. I see our distinguished leader is in the Chamber. But I wished to thank President Obama for asking Governor Vilsack to be Secretary of Agriculture. I have asked Senator CHAMBLISS. We know of no objections—not one objection on our committee—to his nomination.

So I hope the Senate will, this afternoon, by unanimous consent, clear him so tomorrow he can be at the door. He said: As soon as I am confirmed, the first thing I want to do is go to the Department of Agriculture and stand outside at 7 o'clock in the morning to greet all the people coming in because I want them to know I care about them, that I honor their work and look forward to being Secretary of the Department. The one Department I always say, of all the Secretaries we have—the Secretaries of State and Treasury get all this publicity, and they travel around the world and all that and get a lot of publicity—the Secretary of Agriculture hardly gets any publicity. But no Department—no Department—touches every American every day as closely and as intimately as the Department of Agriculture: the food you eat, the clothes you wear, the food safety programs. Things happen to our kids in school, what they eat—all this is in the Department of Agriculture.

So I hope the Senate will, by unanimous consent, follow the lead of the Agriculture Committee in unanimously approving Tom Vilsack to be our next Secretary of Agriculture.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that a letter, dated January 20, 2009, be printed in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

U.S. SENATE, COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY,

Washington, DC, January 20, 2009.

Re Nomination of Thomas J. Vilsack to be Secretary of Agriculture

Hon. HARRY REID,
Majority Leader.

Hon. MITCH MCCONNELL,
Republican Leader.

DEAR LEADERS: On December 17, 2008, President-elect Obama announced his intention to nominate Thomas J. Vilsack, of Iowa, to be Secretary of Agriculture.

The Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry forwarded the Committee's nomination questionnaire to Secretary-designate Vilsack. The Committee requires each nominee to complete a questionnaire relating to the nominee's qualifications and potential conflicts of interest. Governor Vilsack's responses to the questionnaire provided basic biographical and financial information.

As part of the confirmation process, the Committee received the nominee's Public Financial Disclosure Report and a copy of Governor Vilsack's letter to Mr. Raymond J. Sheehan, Designated Agency Ethics Official, U.S. Department of Agriculture. This letter details the steps that Governor Vilsack will take to avoid potential conflicts or the appearance of a conflict of interest.

In anticipation of the nomination, the Committee conducted a hearing on January 14, 2009, in public session, to carefully review the credentials and qualifications of Secretary-designate Vilsack. Governor Vilsack was the only witness at this hearing.

After the hearing and after Committee Members had the opportunity to review responses to written questions submitted for the record, the Committee polled all Members of the Committee to ascertain their positions regarding this nominee. We are pleased to report that the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry unanimously supports the nomination of Thomas J. Vilsack for the position of Secretary of Agriculture.

TOM HARKIN,
Chairman.

SAXBY CHAMBLISS,
Ranking Member.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The majority leader is recognized.

SCHEDULE

Mr. REID. Mr. President, following leader remarks, there will be a period of morning business, with Senators allowed to speak for up to 10 minutes each. There will be no rollcall votes today.

SENATOR TED KENNEDY

Mr. REID. Mr. President, we have just left the memorable inauguration of Barack Obama. But as President Obama said a few minutes ago, our minds are not on the events of today but for the fact that Senator KENNEDY took ill during the lunch. Senator KENNEDY is now in a Washington hospital.